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NEXUS OF FAITH AND REASON: EXPLORING THE INTERPLAY OF EXISTENTIALISM AND THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

Clement O. Oyelakin, Ph. D[1*]

[1*] The Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, PM.B. 4008, Ogbomoso.

***Correspondence:** Clement O. Oyelakin, Ph. D

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ABSTRACT: People across various disciplines of human inquiry have been critical of the intricate nexus of faith and reason over the years. Usually, intense debates and controversies arise as humans tend to determine which concept qualifies as the final arbiter in answering life's most compelling questions. Existentialism as a philosophical ideology emphasizes individual existence, freedom and choice as formidable prerequisites for meaningful living. The Christian faith, on the other hand, anchors meaningful existence on a genuine relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ. By isolating existentialism as a philosophical ideology that shares significant affinities and differences with the basic tenets of the Christian faith, the paper aims to explore the congruity and points of divergence between the two concepts. The paper posits that while contradictory principles of existentialism should trigger a concern among Christians, its compatible and relevant teachings with the Christian tenets on human existence should be embraced and imbibed.

Keywords: *Christian Faith, Reason, Existentialism.*

Introduction

The growing similarities and differences of classical philosophical thoughts on humans' existence and truth claims

have continued to attract compelling responses from the Christian Church. Apart from the general presentations and classifications of humans in terms of their rational and spiritual powers in many philosophical ideologies, each ideological concept still maintains distinctive emphases and peculiarities in its understanding of humanity, ultimate reality, and the nature of truth. In some cases, the emergence of a new philosophical anthropology and ideology was a reaction to the old. However, it appears there is no certainty that numerous postulations have satisfactorily met the yearnings of the modern man.

The aim of this paper, therefore, is to explore the challenges and relevance of existentialism to the basic tenets of the Christian faith. Existentialism emphasizes individual existence, freedom and choice. It teaches that humans define their own meaning in life and try to make rational decisions despite existing in an irrational universe.[i]The paper posits that while contradictory principles of existentialism should trigger a concern among Christians, its compatible and relevant teachings with the Christian tenets on humanity should be embraced and imbibed.

Overview and Presuppositions of Existentialism

In *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, existentialism has been described as a philosophy and literary movement that came to prominence in Europe, particularly in France, immediately after World War II. It emerged with the overall focus on the uniqueness of each human individual as distinguished from abstract universal human qualities.[ii] Etymologically, the word "existence" is from the Latin *ex* and *sister,* "to step forth," or "emerge."[iii] Existentialism is mainly a reaction against traditional philosophies developed to oppose certain philosophical doctrines and themes. John Macquarie asserts that some kind of metaphysical rationalism is almost always the background of existentialism.[iv] Thus, existentialism, just like Marxism, arose as a reaction to Hegelianism.[v]

The ideology affirms that existence ("being in the world") precedes essence. It objects to what it regards as a "fundamental distortion" of the tradition of classical philosophy. It argues that traditional philosophy is biased in describing man as a rational and descriptive animal, thereby neglecting the affective, emotional and

genuinely personal qualities of the individual.[vi] The protagonists have traced its origin to the likes of Pascal, St. Augustine, and even to Socrates.[vii]Although as early as the 17th Century, Blaise Pascal's declaration that "without a God, life would be meaningless, boring and miserable" was very existentialistic; existentialism in its current form was popularized by Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. By the mid-19th Century, French existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Simone de Beauvoir had written scholarly and fictional works that brought mainline existential themes, such as individual existence, freedom, choice, nothingness, and the absurd, into prominence.[viii]

Prior to the popularization of 19th-century existential philosophy, Western civilization had always regarded human as merely one other abstract object to be studied and rationalized, thus neglecting or undermining his individuality and personality. Existentialism, therefore, kicks against experimental scientism, which see man as a static being that is already made and predetermined and which may be studied and predicted as one may study any natural object.[ix] Despite their noticeable doctrinal differences, "all existentialists share several 'family resemblances' that make them existentialists in a broad sense."[x]They all share the belief that philosophical thinking begins with the human subject as acting, feeling, living human individual (individual existence)[xi], and that it is that individual existence that gives meaning to life, not the essence, which is regarded as the external demand of metaphysics. Therefore, existentialism recognizes *individual concrete existence and experience* in place of the *essence,* which is the meaning ascribed to life based on external inputs.

There is a need to state that there are both theistic and atheistic existentialist philosophers. Theistic existentialists are those who recognize the existence and place of God in the universe, while atheistic existential philosophers posit otherwise. Apart from Kierkegaard, another prominent theistic existentialist is Marcel, while leading atheistic existentialists include Heidegger and Sartre. Basic teachings of existential philosophy are hereby highlighted.

Basic Teachings of Existentialism

Existence Precedes Essence

This is the cardinal postulation of the existentialists, which is also central to their teachings. This means that the actual life of human beings is their existence and, invariably, their "true essence", instead of the "coercive essence" given to them by others to describe them. In other words, the most important consideration for individuals is that they are individuals – independently acting and responsible, conscious beings ("existence") – rather than what labels, roles, stereotypes and definitions (essence) accord them.[xii] Therefore, it is human beings who can create meaning in their lives through their own consciousness.[xiii]

In his work *Contemporary Philosophy*, James L. Jarrett asserts that existence is first and last a philosophy of man; not of man as a collection or as a social whole, to be viewed by the instruments of social scientist; nor of man as species, to be analyzed by biologists and anthropologists; nor of man as an ideal entity to be described and celebrated by metaphysicists and theologians.[xiv] Existentialists such as Kierkegaard insist that man should be distinguished from other creatures, for only man is required to make resolute decisions of moral choice. Therefore, according to Kierkegaard, existence comes into being with that choice.[xv] Existentialism maintains that what individuals do defines who they are. For instance, a person who always tells lies to other people is, by that action, known or defined as a liar.

Individual Intentionality

Existentialism's definition of genuine existence lies in the individual's ability to view life as intended and live accordingly. A prominent existentialist, notably Sartre, formulates the doctrine of intentionality to insist that man's view of fellow man is always subjective; other people are viewed not necessarily as they are, but as intentional objects of the viewer's perceptions, beliefs and emotions.[xvi] It is on this basis that Søren Kierkegaard chose for his own epitaph the words "that individual."[xvii]

Limitation of Reason and Positivism

Some existentialists kick against the definition of human beings as primarily rational, and as such, opposes rationalism and positivism.[xviii] Kierkegaard asserts that rationality is a means of interacting with the objective world (e.g. in the natural

sciences), but when it comes to existential problems, reason is insufficient. This presupposes that human reason has limitations and boundaries.[xix]Sartre also asserts that rationality and other forms of "bad faith" hinder people from finding meaning in freedom.

Authentic Existence and Experience

In existentialism, authenticity is what defines authentic existence. Existentialism maintains that what matters is our own authentic experience and that all absolute systems of belief are artificial defences against despair.[xx] This suggests that one has to "create oneself" and then live accordingly. It is also in line with Kierkegaard's philosophy that individuals should live in accordance with their thinking.[xxi]The meaning of authenticity is that "in acting, one should act as oneself, not as one's genes, or in line with any other essential requirements (essence).[xxii]

Freedom of Choice and Responsibility

Existentialism teaches that one is free to choose his values and ignore that which society places on him. However, one is responsible for his own choice. Alasdair Macintyre notes that this thesis of existentialism suggests that human beings do not have fixed natures that limit or determine their choices. Rather, it is their choices that bring whatever nature they have into being.[xxiii] Sartre goes further to posit that there is no such thing as a universal human essence. Each man chooses his own essence.[xxiv]In existentialism, there is a significant sense of interrelatedness between freedom and responsibility.

Being and Absurdity

The notion behind this principle suggests the meaninglessness of the world except the meaning we give to it.[xxv] In his words, Alasdair Macintyre presumes that the existentialists believe that reality always evades adequate conceptualization. The postulation presupposes that the world is amoral or unfair, as it permits anything to happen to anyone at any time. This is referred to as the absurdity of the world. It is the presupposition that man exists without justification (hence, absurdly) in a world

into which we are 'thrown,' or 'condemned.'[xxvi] However, Kierkegaard recommends a "leap of faith" towards God in the face of life's absurdity.

Nothingness

This idea is a rejection of an inherent essence attributed to being. Through Sartre's definition of existentialism, John Macquarie notes that existence means that the human person begins as nothing, and only afterwards would he become something and form his essence through his chosen policies of action.[xxvii] Existentialism posits that an awareness of anything else in this world that is not inherently one's own existence is an awareness of nothingness.[xxviii] In a sense, existentialism's idea of nothingness is closely linked with individual responsibility.

Angst and Dread, and Despair

This refers to the negative feeling that arises from the experience of human freedom and responsibility. It is also called anxiety or anguish. It notes that when a man is gripped with fear, he can take definitive measures to remove the object of fear, but in the case of angst, no such "constructive" measures are possible. There is always the feeling of inherent insecurity about the consequences of one's actions. Despair, in existentialism, is a state of hopelessness that a man finds himself in when he experiences a breakdown in qualities that define his identity. For example, a singer who loses the ability to sing may despair if she has nothing else to fall back on—nothing to rely on for her identity. She finds herself unable to be what defines her being.[xxix] Existentialism's definition of despair is different from the conventional one because of the postulation that one is at a perpetual state of despair (even when he is not overtly in despair) so long as his identity depends on qualities that can crumble.[xxx] Thus, existentialism sees despair as intrinsic to human existence and life.

The Christian Faith and Its Basic Tenets

Christianity is a major faith tradition that centres around the person and work of Christ. It is a faith tradition practiced by the Christian Church**,** which is the community of people who make up the body of believers in Christ. It originated from a set of ideas and ways of life and practices that have been handed down from

generation to generation since Jesus first became the object of faith.[xxxi] Some of the basic tenets of the Christian faith are enumerated below.

Emphasis on Monotheism

The first tenet of the Christian faith is monotheism, which recognizes the concept of only one true God as the Creator of heaven and earth and the sole object of human worship. The theological framework for Christian monotheism is traced to the Genesis 1-3 creation account with an affirmation of God as the Creator of the heavens and the earth. The creation account, however, climaxed in humans created in God's image, that is, the ability to share the attributes of God (Gen 126, 27). However, the image of God in the human person was tainted and marred by sin due to the Fall. Therefore, humans needed special help and intervention from God in order to live a life of freedom from sin, death and other incapacitations. God's intervention in restoring the divine image and in the redemption of mankind was what led to the death and resurrection of Christ on the cross.

Salvation Through Faith in Christ Alone

The Christian tenet of salvation through faith in Christ alone is premised on His death and resurrection by which God's wrath for human sin was perfectly atoned for. The tenet focuses on the centrality of Christ as the only way to eternal salvation for all humans. The fact that God has provided a unique way of salvation through the incarnation, life, sacrificial death, and resurrection of his divine Son[xxxii] makes Him perfectly fit as the Architect of human salvation and hope. The Christian faith, therefore, is founded on a unique divine Founder with unique supernatural facts and a life-changing relationship and experience.[xxxiii] It must be noted that the concept of salvation in Christ is holistic and all-encompassing. It cuts across salvation from sin, fear, despair, satanic domination, onslaughts, and eternal damnation.

The Obligation of Human Response to God Through Faith in Christ

God's work of redemption through Christ makes it essential for everyone to believe in Jesus Christ, the only Saviour, to be saved. This belief is a form of faith-motivated response which, according to Kasper, is "the comprehensive reaction of the human

being to the prior action of God in revealing himself."[xxxiv] It is a trusting in God and a building on God, a gaining of a foothold in God, a saying of 'Amen' to God, with all the consequences this entails.[xxxv] The Christian faith is based on an experiential relationship with the person of Jesus Christ. The unique type of relationship that exists between Christ and the believer is the essential character of Christianity that gives it a unique identity.[xxxvi] Jesus' affirmation of Himself as "the way", "the life", and "the truth" roughly means that Jesus fully participates in the reality of the one God and transcends all the realities there are.[xxxvii] This narrowing of focus on Jesus Christ as the only way and the truth means that all human efforts should be directed to Him for salvation and human existential needs.

The Holy Bible as Final Authority in Matters of Faith and Practice

The Holy Bible is God's inspired Word and the authentic objective Source of the Christian faith, theology and doctrines. This tenet is based on the divine authorship and authoritativeness of God's word. The book of II Timothy 3:16 says, *"All Scripture is God-breath and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness."* As the inspired Word of God, mediated by the Holy Spirit (John 16 12-15), it is the authentic objective Source of the Christian faith and theology and serves as a divine mirror through which humans apprehend God's self-disclosure.[xxxviii] The Christian faith sees the Bible not as a philosophical treatise, although it has a philosophical dimension that offers guidelines for understanding and deals with a great many things which most philosophers would regard as irrelevant.[xxxix] The Holy Bible is a veritable instrument through which doctrinal authenticity is possible. Its Divine authorship, canonization and inerrancy are the major theological grounds for its infallibility.

Christ's Return and Final Judgment

The Christian Bible teaches and anticipates Christ's return that will usher in the final Judgment of the world. It is the eschatological judgment that will take place when Jesus returns to judge the living and the dead, with the recompense (reward or retribution) that will accompany the event.[xl] Therefore, the Christian faith encourages

all souls to prepare in order to appear before God to give an account of their life stewardship and avoid eternal damnation.

The Interplay of Existentialism and the Christian Faith

Points of Agreement

Worthy of mention is theistic existentialists' rejection of reason and metaphysical philosophy in defining or measuring human existence. Existentialists' emphasis on the individual experience in place of reason is compatible with the Christian emphasis on the limitation of reason. Sartre is correct to assert that man's view of fellow man is always prone to subjectivity, with the possibility that the viewer may be influenced by emotions, beliefs and perceptions. The Christian faith agrees with the postulation that, when it comes to existential problems, reasons are insufficient and that human reason has boundaries and limitations. Christianity agrees with the existentialists' position that reason often leads to the formulation of generalizations that should not be absolutely relied upon.[xli] This position is valid from the viewpoint of evangelical Christianity, as it exposes the limitations of reason.

In addition, common themes in the existentialists' exponents, such as decision, conscience and responsibility, are all positive moral values that the Christian faith extols. The supposition that people are responsible for their individual actions and choices cannot be faulted by Christians. Existentialism maintains that as we choose (in good or bad faith), we define ourselves.[xlii] This is in agreement with the Christian teaching on the freedom, merit and demerit of individual choices. The Christian faith goes further to encourage individual people to choose right in accordance with God's principles to avoid dire consequences. Existentialism's position that man's choice often leads to despair when the finite man realizes he belongs to an infinity which he could not achieve alone is compatible with Christian teachings.

In addition, there are significant similarities in theistic existentialists' postulations on the meaninglessness of life without God. Kierkegaard argues that "to equate faith with assent to a system, no matter how correct and well-argued, is to replace God by an idol.[xliii] He further concludes that the only salvation is the acceptance of Christ, who is the infinite become finite, the eternal became temporal, through whom the

individual may transcend himself in achieving unity with God.[xliv] This is very much in sync with the Christian message of the meaninglessness of life without God.

This Kierkegaard's position is not only relevant to the Christian teaching of salvation and absolute freedom in Christ; it also provides some useful data in the development of Christian theology. Kierkegaard declares further that it is only as an individual fully aware of who he is, who takes the risk of whole-hearted practical commitment to God in Christ, that he exists as a believer.[xlv] Therefore, theistic existentialists' offer of a transcendental Salvation through God in Christ is in tandem with biblical revelation. In line with this, the Christians stress that the incarnate Christ, through His life and works, fulfils and completes all the aspirations of humanity.[xlvi] Whereas existentialism and Christianity recognize the usefulness of human efforts in finding meaning in life, the emphasis of theistic existentialists on personal encounter with Christ for ultimate fulfilment of life is consistent with the teachings of the Christian faith.

As such, Kierkegaard's recommendation of a "leap of faith" toward finding a meaning of life and achieving unity and freedom with God is perpetually relevant. His recommendation of a "leap of faith" towards God in the face of life's absurdity is also theologically profound. Kierkegaard's God is the holy, transcendent Creator…who meets people in the wounding word of the law…and whose promise is trustworthy.[xlvii] Also, the claim of Pascal that "without a God, life would be meaningless, boring and miserable" is a critical theological position that the Christian faith upholds.

Points of Disagreement

The first point of disagreement between existentialism and the Christian faith is the former's overemphasis on the distinctiveness of human existence over essence. Whereas the existentialists dismiss the importance of human essence on the over-arching significance placed on human existence, the overall emphasis of the Christian faith on the two concepts does not indicate a thick line of difference between them. Rather, the Christian faith emphasizes a significant correlation between existence and essence, and that both are paramount to meaningful living.

Meaningful existence is justified in its essence. The Christian faith agrees that existence precedes essence, but adds that existence is a means to an end. The Christian faith maintains harmony between the two concepts in that it does not dismiss the relevance of one at the expense of the other. In fact, the instrumentality of the human essence is a pertinent means by which existence is truly defined.

Furthermore, there is an aspect of individual freedom in existentialism that the Christian faith disagrees with. In existentialism, there is the tension that exists between finitude and freedom, and it is because of this tension that freedom is always accompanied by anxiety.[xlviii] Although some existentialists account that they owe some modicum of responsibility to others while emphasizing human freedom, the Christian faith disagrees with the absolute freedom typology that rubbishes the roles and values entrenched in the moral dimension of human life, laws and universal principles. Most importantly, the Christian faith emphasizes freedom that is rooted in love for God and fellow humans (Matthew 22:36-40). It should be noted that an unrestrained and warped sense of human freedom is capable of truncating societal sanity and a man's leap of faith towards God.

Another area of disagreement deals with Sartre's "Being" and "Nothingness." By propounding that every other thing about life apart from one's own awareness is nothing, Sartre seems to be attributing features of meaninglessness and anxiety to life. According to Herbert Marcuse, this is an attempt to project some features of living in a modern oppressive society.[xlix] The Christian faith dissociates itself from some existentialists' perception of human life from the viewpoint of negativity and hopelessness, which, in the words of Sartre, is regarded as "bad faith." In Christianity, however, life is not all about negativity and nothingness, especially for those who maintain an impeccable relationship with the Giver of life. To such, there is an escape route of freedom from the grip of sin and despair through faith in Christ.

Thus, existence in Christianity is an eschatological gift that breaks the chain of causality by which sin leads to despair and death.[l] It is a gift which is attained by faith and which enables its recipient to live gloriously, hopefully and charitably in Christ and in the neighbourhood.[li] This is the dynamics of the retroactive relation that exists between the concept of despair and angst in existentialism and the Christian

faith. Yes, the Christian faith recognizes that life is not free of its challenges, travails and trials, but points to the possibility of victory through Christ (John 16:33). Therefore, to posit that anything one is aware of outside of oneself amounts to nothingness is to deny positivism and possibility, thereby discouraging aspiration and hope. Whereas, in Christianity, human existence is governed by faith, genuine aspiration and hope.

Another area of disagreement between the two concepts being explored deals with what seems to be some existentialists' disregard for the ethical dimension of human life – including human obligation to God Himself. This is subsumed in the notion that humans are not bound by the commands of God or the moral demands of living. Some atheistic existentialists like Nietzsche go as far as declaring that "God is dead" and that the concept of God is no longer relevant. For a Christian critic, nothing could be more blasphemous! Macquarie observes that such "atheistic existentialists reject God not because of being persuaded by argument but because the very idea of God poses a threat to the freedom and autonomy of the human being…"[lii] Without being challenged, this position may adversely impact "innocent minds," Christians and theologians who have always maintained that God is real and active in the universe.

Conclusion

Although some critics have considered existentialism as a theologically neutral doctrine, some of its teachings have significant implications and challenges for Christians to either embrace or discard. While areas of disparity between existentialism and Christianity call for concern, areas of similarity, especially as advanced by most theistic existentialists, should be embraced. This is in recognition of the fact that some theistic existentialists like Kierkegaard, Karl Barth and Paul Tillich were all famous existentialist theologians who applied existentialist concepts to Christian theology, and thereby introduced existential theology to the general public. A critical, unbiased and objective mindset will help the Christians to effectively evaluate the merits of ideological postulations such as existentialism and the relevance of its claims to human existence.

The emphases of existentialism on human existence challenge the Christian Church to continually promote the ideals of meaningful "existence" that recognize the place of the Ultimate Creator in human life. The Church has the moral obligation of rising up to the challenges of philosophical ideologies with an appropriate response that is biblically coherent in answering existential questions. The Christian Church needs to wake up to her prophetic role in proffering hope in a world full of despair, frustration and anxiety. The Church should intensify efforts at enlightening and promoting authentic biblical humanity, which is rooted in God's ultimate provision for all humans in Christ. The Church has a duty to teach the existential, moral, relational and spiritual essence of humanity as God's creation. Theological institutions should continually formulate credible creeds on Christian and philosophical teachings that are helpful to maintaining harmonious relationships with God and fellow humans.

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